

Editorial: Dry winter could be the 'new normal'

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Even with the recent storms, California is likely to finish this winter with water supplies as austere as the economy.

With reservoirs already low after three years of weak precipitation, the impact will be harsh on every aspect of the state – its farm industries, its environment and people who live in wildfire zones.

Some communities are now taking steps to cut back water use, and the Department of Water Resources has urged everyone to reduce water consumption by 20 percent. Yet officials are often delivering these messages with the suggestion that this will be a temporary drought — one that we can get through if we all make some short-term sacrifices.

That may be wishful thinking. Whether or not you believe in global climate change, the chances are great that California could be entering a period that is much drier than the last 150 years.

Scientific studies have found evidence of past droughts in the West that lasted hundreds of years. The tree stumps found at the bottom of Lake Tahoe suggest that the lake shrank to dramatically low levels during a drought that started in the early 1200s and lasted a century, allowing forests to grow where there is now deep water.

California not only gets its liquid assets from the Sierra; it imports trillions of gallons yearly from Lake Mead on the Colorado River. If weather patterns hold or get drier, scientists at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography think it's possible that Lake Mead will drop too low within a decade to provide water or generate power.

Scripps scientists and other groups have coined a term to describe this daunting scenario: the "new normal." Use of the term suggests that water managers should not make plans based on the hydrology of the past, but on a much more stingy future.

Conservation, improved efficiency and recycling of water must all be in this mix, along with cost-effective methods of increasing supply. But investments in new

water projects must recognize the reality: The Pacific storms that have blanketed the Sierra and fed the Colorado River may not be as generous in the 21st century as they were previously. The "new normal" will require a rethinking of every aspect of water management in the West.



FLORENCE LOW/Sacramento Bee file, 2009

New normal? Cyclists ride where fish once swam near Folsom Dam.